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'I'm the Biggest Burglar of the Century'

'Billy the Kidd' Makes a Deal, Pleads Guilty; Boasts He Committed at Least 3,000 Burglaries

By Lee Michael Katz
Journal Staff Writer

A modern-day outlaw who eluded police while committing thousands of burglaries throughout the Washington area plea-bargained himself into a 20-year prison term in an Arlington courtroom yesterday, closing a self-confessed career of crime.

Awed detectives call him simply "Billy the Kidd," his favorite alias. Now behind bars in the Arlington Jail is a short, 25-year-old orphaned drug addict arrested for cashing stolen travelers' checks at a local motel.

By the time local detectives, the FBI and military police finish piecing his story together, Billy the Kidd boasts, they will have a self-proclaimed "burglar of the century" who has scored an astonishing tally of crimes using multiple identities and bizarre subterfuges.

He claims he broke into highrise offices by lowering himself on ropes down the sides

of the buildings, commuted by taxicab to two or three burglaries a day because he owned no car, and used the proceeds from his crimes to support a costly drug habit.

The residential and office burglary count stands at more than 3,000 since 1976, according to his own and police estimates, and the value of the goods he's stolen tops \$2 million.

Billy the Kidd called that figure "the tip of the iceberg."

"I'm better than (notorious burglar) Bernard Welch," he said in a series of jailhouse interviews. "I never killed anyone. I was never caught inside a building."

The end came for the self-proclaimed master burglar on May 13, when Arlington police surrounded him at a Clarendon motel after he "just slipped up." It was during a week-long orgy of burglaries and drugs after his 20-year-old girlfriend left him to go back home to Massachusetts.

With Billy the Kidd behind bars and confessing to one burglary after another, local police investigators are working to sift through the mountain of testimony he's offered.

To their surprise, they are finding that many of his stories check out:

- Last year, he broke into the offices of the federal Drug Enforcement Agency in Washington

be a special agent, said Arlington Police Department spokesman Tom Bell. Billy the Kidd said he used the identification and a stolen gold badge to avoid arrests while making drug purchases.

- In Fairfax County, he claims responsibility for a long string of break-ins, most of them commercial. "His original estimate to us has been 400," said police investigator Joseph Gaudiano. "From what he's told us, most of it checks out."

- Alexandria and Falls Church have offered him immunity from prosecution for his alleged crimes if he will help them close their books on scores of unsolved burglary cases there.

- In D.C., police accompanied him to a bank he said he'd robbed and asked him to explain how he'd gotten inside. He pulled out a screwdriver, a D.C. police detective told the *Journal*, "stuck it in and the next thing you know, the back door popped open. He took us up and around the bank, and no alarms went off."

Other tales of the exploits of William Lee Kidd, actually William Lee Offutt, are not so easily verified.

Kidd claims he slipped past guards and alarm systems to break into the FBI and CIA buildings, "just to see if I could get in."

He said he swung over to the FBI roof downtown by climbing an adjacent building.

At CIA headquarters in Langley, Offutt claimed, he scaled a fence, slipped past a guard post at the service entrance, then covered his eyes with film negatives to thread his way through a "spiderweb" of infrared sensors before becoming scared and leaving.

In both cases, Offutt said, he wasn't after money or information.

"I was just on one of my strange little missions," he said. "This past year, I got to the point of challenging myself."

CIA spokeswoman Cathy Pherson said the agency could not comment on any claim of a break-in last January. FBI special agent Larry Ankrum, investigating Offutt's links to an FBI fencing operation, said the break-in tale "seems a bit bizarre."

The compact, climbing-boot-clad burglar said he has provided investigators with details describing offices inside both buildings to prove he got in.

Tomorrow, he added, he is scheduled to show FBI agents how he did it.

"He's a remarkable individual," commented an awed District of Columbia police detective John W. Ridenour III. "Anything he said he did, I can't in good conscience say he didn't do it."

Ridenour, an 11-year veteran detective, arrested Offutt on a burglary charge in April, after he allegedly turned up in a photograph of an FBI "sting" operation.

"He's the type of guy who could do anything he wanted to," said Ridenour, who said police have independently verified many of Offutt's claims.

"He was a true professional," said Arlington police spokesman Bell.

Arlington police alone have cleared more than 200 burglaries on information supplied by Offutt. "Everything he's told us has checked out," Bell noted.

Billy the Kidd rappelled down high-rise buildings in Rosslyn and other suburban areas, burglarizing offices and apartments inside with tools no more sophisticated than screwdrivers. Arlington police have found climbing ropes he left behind, spokesman Bell said.

In hours of tape-recorded interviews with the *Journal*, Offutt claimed he began his career of crime while growing up in Prince George's County, Md. He belonged to a burglary gang there, he said, and participated in gang shootouts.

He joined the Army at 16 by lying about his age, he said, and then deserted. Later he joined the Marine Corps under the name William Lee Kidd, his favorite of "countless" aliases.

Offutt claimed he took his military papers and shuttled between Army posts in the Southwest, collecting thousands of dollars in re-enlistment bonuses before arousing suspicion at